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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NEBRASKA'S NATURAL GAS COLD WEATHER RULE IN EFFECT NOVEMBER 1

LINCOLN – Nebraska's cold weather rule, which provides an additional 30-day grace period for natural gas customers to pay their bills, goes into effect for a five-month period beginning November 1.

The Nebraska Public Service Commission's cold weather rule applies only to customers of the state's three privately owned natural gas companies – Aquila, Kinder Morgan, and Northwestern Energy. From November 1 through March 31, those companies cannot shut off service to customers without allowing an additional 30 days to pay beyond the normal bill date.

Commission Chairman Lowell Johnson of North Bend said the aim of the cold weather rule is to bring customers and the companies together to find solutions to payment problems during the season when natural gas bills are the highest and the need for natural gas is the greatest. "The Commission urges customers finding it difficult to pay natural gas bills during the winter heating months to contact the company to make arrangements for payment. The cold weather rule is intended to provide an opportunity for customers to work out a payment plan with their natural gas supplier."

The commissioner noted that predictions are for lower natural gas prices than last winter, but that the monthly bill will still be difficult for some customers to pay. "There are several ways that customers can utilize to minimize the impact of natural gas prices," Johnson said.

He recommended reducing thermostat settings when a home or building is unoccupied, checking gas appliances and space-heating equipment for efficient operation, obtaining a home energy audit to identify ways to conserve energy, and participation in a gas company's yearly budget plan to spread gas costs throughout the year.

"Customers can also check furnace filters regularly to keep the air in the home cleaner, conserve water use because water in the home's pipes is colder during the winter and takes longer to heat, improve insulation, install storm windows and doors or attach clear plastic to the inside or outside of windows and screen doors, caulk around windows and door frames, and cover window air conditioners," Johnson said.

“Another important step,” Johnson said, “is to check with the natural gas companies or a local public assistance agency for help with natural gas costs. About three-fourths of Nebraska’s residents also have 2-1-1 dialing for health and human services referrals, which also can direct callers to appropriate program administrators.”

The Commission implemented the cold weather rule when it was given regulatory authority over the state’s privately owned natural gas companies by the 2003 Legislature. Some Nebraska communities are served by municipally owned natural gas utilities that are not subject to regulation by the Commission.

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